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ABSTRACT

This study compared the perceptions of school principals with those of novice teachers regarding beginning teacher competencies. Participants were elementary school principals from Hong Kong and recent graduates from the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Surveys of the two groups indicated that, in general, school principals were satisfied with the graduates' performance. Beginning teachers' self-perceived performance generally matched school principals' perceptions of their performance. Both groups perceived that the novices performed well in the following eight areas: use of classroom language (Cantonese), reading in Chinese, caring for students, ability to build rapport with students, teamwork, sense of responsibility and commitment, ability to build rapport with colleagues, and professional ethics. However, the results also found several areas where the graduates performed below par, though these areas were perceived to be very important by principals (classroom management, student assessment, helping students with emotional and/or behavioral problems, and encouraging students' independent learning and helping them to develop problem solving skills). (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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Understanding the Competence of Beginning Teachers and the Expectations of School Principals

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The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Paper presented at the

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New Orleans

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Background

In Hong Kong, the Education Department of the SAR government has recently launched an education reform comprising directions for changes within the school curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2001), and hence within teaching during the ensuing ten years. In order to meet the new demands of the reform, there is a growing concern regarding the competence of beginning teachers and the quality of teacher education programmes. In line with this concern, this paper compares the perceptions of school principals with those of novice teachers on the competence of such newly qualified members of staff. The findings compare the relative importance of teacher competence items with the perceived competence of the novices as perceived by the school principals. On the other hand, the study also invites the novices to rate their own performance.

Teacher Competence

There are a number of studies in Hong Kong which have looked into issues relating to the competence of teachers. Siu and Lo (1987) described the perceptions of a good teacher from the viewpoint of school principals, parents, teachers and pupils. Chan (1992) and Cheng (1994) researched teachers' self-concept and their locus of control respectively. However, these studies merely provided descriptions of the generic characteristics of a good teacher or explained the relationship between the characteristics of a teacher and their attitude in teaching. Awareness of the competence of beginning teachers in Hong Kong schools was highlighted when Cooke and Pang (1991) described the problems facing such individuals and suggested that the first year of teaching is indeed a crucial and difficult one. It is, therefore, important that more understanding is gained concerning the competence of graduates of local initial teacher education so that teacher educators can better assess the impact of their programmes. Studies involving novice teachers, additionally, may help to bridge the knowledge gap between newly qualified and experienced teachers and portray a picture of continual professional

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development.

In order to formulate a study on the perception of novice teachers' competence, a review of studies on teacher development and competence was conducted. Among the studies on teacher development, Bell and Gilbert's (1996) was particularly relevant to the present investigation. It defined 3 areas of teacher development as social, personal and professional. These areas may provide a framework for analysing beginning teachers' competence, along with the inclusion of areas on professional or instructional competency, that of building inter-personal relationships, and areas enhancing professional development as well as meeting the needs of the school as an organisation.

Among the studies on teacher competence, four models conceptualizing competence are evident. These models have different implications for the understanding of such ability, and for making basic assumptions about assessment and teacher education. The first two models include Taylor's (1949) behaviourist approach and a process model which focuses on the role of teachers as the result of functional analysis.

The third type refers to an interactive model by Hodkinson (1992) or a cognitive model (Reynolds and Salters, 1995) which takes knowledge and understanding into account, and is deemed to be more accurate and holistic in analysing teacher competence. In addition, researchers are also reminded about the importance of the personal dimension (Wolf, 1989). Edmund Short (1985) clarifies the confusion and presents four different conceptions of competence which include competence as behaviour, command of knowledge, level of capability, and quality of a person or state of being.

The fourth model offers a holistic consideration towards teacher competence, conceptualizing it as not only lists of behaviours, but also including attitudes, motives and qualities of an individual teacher. Moreover, teacher educators (Ashburn, 1987; Reynolds, 1992) have considered it as a dynamic and developmental concept. The sufficiency concept is also relevant to the present study as school principals who are employers or leaders of the school may determine the sufficiency level for beginning teachers. This sufficiency level may also vary according to different contextual situations.

The definition of competence adopted in the present study has taken into account the work of

Short (1985) and the interactive model proposed by Reynolds and Salters (1995). Teacher competence is defined as possessing the necessary skills and abilities within the context of the schools. Competence is not only seen as a set of behaviours but also as the quality of a person at a certain stage of development. Teacher competence is considered as a dynamic and sufficiency concept.

Method

The aims of this study were to identify school principals' perceptions on the performance of graduates from the two-year full-time Certificate of Primary Education Programme CE(P) at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. In addition, the graduates' self-perceived performance was also examined. Research questions in this study included:

- What was the performance of the graduates from the CE(P) programme as perceived by the school principals?
- What were the school principals' perceptions on the relative importance of different teacher competency items?
- What was the self-perception of graduates of the CE(P) programme on their own performance?

The findings reported in this paper were obtained using a quantitative method of study. School principals who have employed graduates of the full-time CE(P) programme were invited to complete a questionnaire indicating their perception of the performance of the beginning teachers and the importance of a range of professional capabilities. The rating scale is a 5-point scale from 1 to 5. The higher the scale, the better the perceived performance. A result of 5 shows that the graduate 'always meets' the required standard, while 3 means the graduate 'just meets' the required standard and 1 indicates those who 'always fail to meet' the standard. Furthermore, the questions also determine the views held by school principals on the importance of skills and knowledge for the teaching posts held by the graduates. The rating scales are between 1 and 5. The higher the score, the more important the particular teacher competence item. Moreover, school principals were invited to rate the graduates' overall performance in all aspects. The questionnaires were administered six months after the teachers had started their teaching careers.

In the questionnaire, professional competence for these teachers was categorized into seven

areas including: academic and professional competency, analytical and problem solving abilities, work attitude, inter-personal skills, information technology competency ,Chinese language ability and English language ability. Adding the content of the seven areas of competencies together, there were a total of 52 elements. The novices were also invited to complete the same questionnaire indicating their self-perception of their performance and, in addition, to rate their own overall performance in all aspects. The analysis of the findings involved a comparison of the perception of the novices with that of the school principals on their performance as well as the relative importance of the competency items.

Two hundred and seventy five primary schools were invited to participate in this study and to complete the questionnaires. The return rate was 65.5% as 180 sets of questionnaires were returned. This participation rate amounts to approximately 25% of all the primary schools in Hong Kong. Each questionnaire set included responses from the school principal and the sampled novice. Among the primary schools returning the questionnaires, most of them (162) were subsidized schools and 115 were half-day schools. The values of the reliability coefficient of the questionnaires for the school principals and the novice teachers were 0.98 and 0.97 respectively.

Findings and Discussion

The study employed two ways of identifying the school principals' perceptions of HKIEd graduates' performance, as well as the graduates' self-perceived performance. The first way of analyzing the data was by using mean scores, while the second identified the relationship between ratings of importance and graduates' performance by constructing a scatter plot. The major findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

In general, the school principals were satisfied with the performance of the graduates, as the overall rating of their performance in seven aspects was 3.88. The corresponding rating of the graduates' self-perceived performance was 3.89, thus indicating parallel results from both parties in this area. As shown in Table 1, the graduates' self-perceived performance in areas of 'work attitude', 'inter-personal skills' and 'academic & professional competency' was equivalent to the expectations of the school principals in rank order.

On the issue of the rating of individual areas, the novices rated their own performance more favourably when compared with the school principals' ratings. The mean values on perceived

performance for the seven areas ranged from 3.7 to 4.1, whereas the ratings from the school principals fell within the range from 3.5 to 4.0.

These findings suggest that the school principals were expecting teachers of a higher calibre as all the scores on the importance of the work were above 4. As shown in Table 2, the important areas of teacher competence, as perceived by the school principals in rank order, were 'work attitude', 'inter-personal skills', 'academic & professional competency', 'analytical & problem-solving ability', 'information technology competency', 'Chinese language proficiency' and 'English language proficiency'. The school principals perceived graduates' English language proficiency to be the least important area of teacher competence. This could be explained by the fact that 95% of the sampled schools were Chinese medium schools.

Table 1:

Graduates' overall performance in each area as perceived by both school principals and graduates in rank order

Areas	School principals' mean rating		Graduates' mean rating	
Work attitude	3.98	(1)	4.10	(1)
Inter-personal skills	3.97	(2)	3.99	(2)
Chinese language proficiency	3.92	(3)	3.91	(4)
Information technology competency	3.83	(4)	3.97	(3)
Academic & professional competency	3.71	(5)	3.73	(5)
English language proficiency	3.69	(6)	3.68	(7)
Analytical & problem-solving abilities	3.54	(7)	3.69	(6)
Overall performance in all aspects	3.88		3.89	

Note: The rank order of each area is shown in brackets.

Table 2:

The importance of teacher competence in each area as perceived by the school principals in rank order

Areas	Importance
Work attitude	4.69
Inter-personal skills	4.62
Academic & professional competency	4.51
Analytical & problem-solving abilities	4.42
Information technology competency	4.33
Chinese Language proficiency	4.26
English Language proficiency	4.07

Graduates' top ten best performed items as perceived by both school principals and graduates

Table 3 presents the ten items which the principals saw as being performed by the graduates to the highest standard. The findings indicate that six out of these ten items were perceived by the school principals as those being performed best by the graduates and the most important item was that of teacher competence (also refer to Table 6). These items included 'use of classroom language – Cantonese', 'team work', 'sense of responsibility and commitment', 'professional ethics', ' ability to build rapport with students' and 'caring for students'. Table 4 shows the top ten best-performed items as perceived by the graduates. These results indicate that the views of both graduates and school principals corresponded with each other concerning performance (also refer to Table 3). Eight out of the ten items were perceived by both graduates and school principals as being the graduates' best performed items. These were 'use of classroom language – Cantonese', 'reading in Chinese', 'caring for students', ' ability to build rapport with students', 'team work', 'sense of responsibility and commitment', ' ability to build rapport with colleagues' and 'professional ethics'. All these items were included in the areas of 'inter-personal skills', 'work attitude' 'academic & professional competency' and 'Chinese language proficiency'.

Table 3:

Graduates' top ten best-performed items as perceived by the school principals in rank order

Rank	Area	Items	Mean
1	Academic & professional competency	Use of classroom language – Cantonese	4.43
2	Inter-personal skills	Team work	4.26
3	Inter-personal skills	Ability to build rapport with colleagues	4.21
4	Work attitude	Sense of responsibility and commitment	4.20
5	Work attitude	Professional ethics	4.17
6	Inter-personal skills	Ability to build rapport with superiors	4.15
7	Chinese language proficiency	Reading in Chinese	4.14
8	Inter-personal skills	Ability to build rapport with students	4.12
9	Work attitude	Caring for students	4.11
10	Academic & professional competency	Carrying out the duty of a class teacher	4.07

Table 4:

Graduates' top ten best-performed items as perceived by the graduates in rank order

Rank	Areas	Items	Mean
1	Academic & professional competency	Use of classroom language - Cantonese	4.68 (4.43)
2	Chinese language proficiency	Reading in Chinese	4.32 (4.14)
3	Work attitude	Caring for students	4.31 (4.11)
4	Inter-personal skills	Ability to build rapport with students	4.26 (4.12)
5	Information technology competency	Use of standard computer software	4.25
6	Inter-personal skills	Team work	4.24 (4.26)
	Work attitude	Sense of responsibility and commitment	4.24 (4.20)
7	Inter-personal skills	Ability to build rapport with colleagues	4.23 (4.21)
8	Work attitude	Professional ethics	4.21 (4.17)
9	Chinese language proficiency	Writing in Chinese	4.19

Note: The mean scores of graduates' best-performed items as perceived by primary school principals are shown in brackets, if the values are different.

The relationship between the graduates' performance and the importance of teacher competence items as perceived by the school principals

A scatter plot shows the relationship between the importance of teacher competence items and graduates' performance as perceived by the school principals. Figure 1 indicates that nine items (Zone 4) in the area of 'academic & professional competency' were perceived by the school principals as the most important items of teacher competence but were in fact least well performed by the graduates. Table 5 lists the graduates' ten least well performed items which were, however, regarded by the school principals as the most important items of teacher competence. These were in the areas of 'academic & professional competency' and 'work attitude'. They included 'arousing students' interest in the subject', 'general classroom teaching skills', 'working with students with different needs', 'classroom management', 'marking assignments and tests', 'assessing students' learning', 'helping students with emotional and/or behavioural problems', 'encouraging students' independent learning and helping them to develop problem-solving skills', 'taking care of students' whole person development', as well as 'initiative and drive'.

Figure 1:

The relationship between the importance of teacher competence items and the graduates' performance as perceived by the school principals

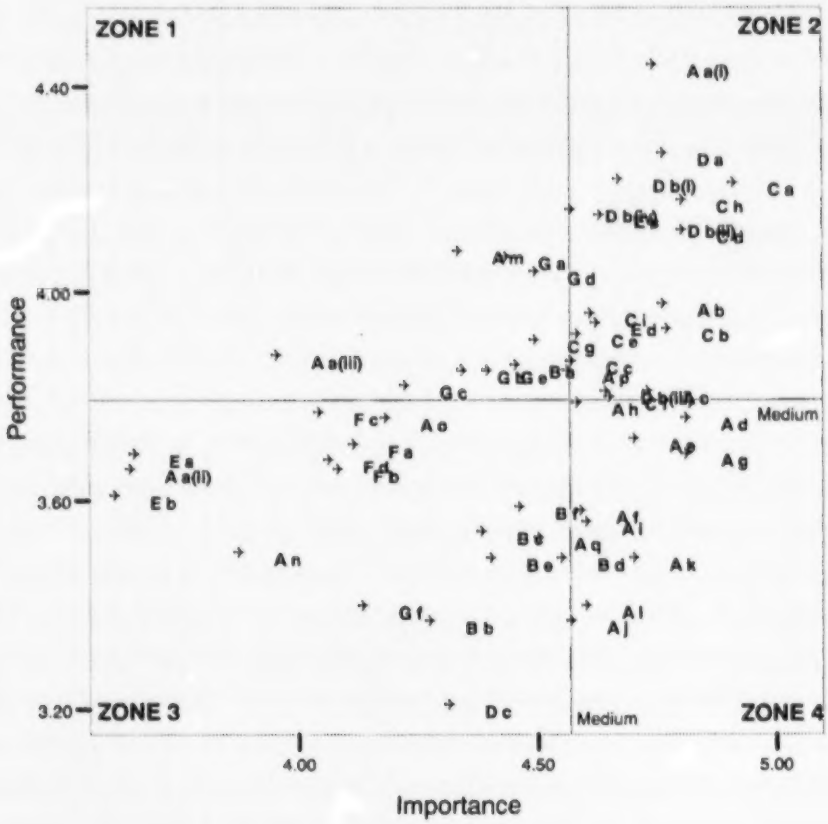

Table 5:

Graduates' least well performed items which were, however, perceived by the school principals as those of most importance with regard to teacher competence

Areas	Items
Academic and Professional Competency	Arousing students' interest in the subject
	General classroom teaching skills Working with students with different needs
	Classroom management
	Marking assignments and tests
	Assessing students' learning
	Helping students with emotional and/ or behavioural problems
	Encouraging students' independent learning and helping them to develop problem-solving skills
	Taking care of students' whole person development
Work attitude	Initiative and drive

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On the other hand, as shown in Figure 1, sixteen items (found in Zone 2) in the areas of 'academic & professional competency', 'work attitude', 'inter-personal skills' as well as 'Chinese language proficiency' were perceived by the school principals as the most important items of teacher competence and the graduates' best-performed items. These included 'use of classroom language – Cantonese', 'knowledge of the subject of teaching', 'teaching method of the subject taught', 'sense of responsibility and commitment', 'ability to work independently', 'caring for students', 'perseverance', 'professional ethics', 'seeking to develop oneself professionally', 'team work', ' ability to build rapport with colleagues', 'ability to build rapport with students', ' ability to build rapport with parents', ' ability to build rapport with superiors', 'reading in Chinese' and 'writing in Chinese' (Table 6). In general, the school principals were quite satisfied with the graduates' overall performance.

Overall, the areas of "work attitude" and "interpersonal skills" were found to be the two in which the novices themselves perceived their best performance. The area of "academic and professional competency" was regarded as important by the school principals. However, the ratings on "perceived performance" were neither high among the school principals nor the novices themselves. Thus their performance in this area did not quite meet the expectations of the principals.

One–way ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the background information about the school and the ratings of the novices. The results suggest that the beginning teachers from schools providing induction activities in the form of workshops, orientation or reduced workload, had a better perception of their own performance. However, these teachers may not realise that their schools also had a higher expectation of their performance.

Table 6

The most important items of teacher competence and graduates' best-performed items as perceived by the school principals

Areas	Items
Academic & professional competency	Use of classroom language – Cantonese
	Knowledge of the subject of teaching
	Teaching method of the subject taught
Work attitude	Sense of responsibility and commitment
	Ability to work independently
	Caring for students
	Perseverance
	Professional ethics
	Seeking to develop oneself professionally
Inter-personal skills	Team work
	Ability to build rapport with colleagues
	Ability to build rapport with students
	Ability to build rapport with parents
	Ability to build rapport with superiors
Chinese language proficiency	Reading in Chinese
	Writing in Chinese

Conclusion

By identifying both the best and least well performed areas and determining the perceptions of the school principals on the importance of the various tasks, programme developers may be able to ascertain possible directions for the improvement of the teacher education curriculum. The findings reveal that the graduates' self-perceived performance matched with the expectations of the school principals. Eight out of the graduates' top ten best-performed items were perceived by both the graduates and the school principals as those in which they showed most ability. These items were:

- 'use of classroom language – Cantonese';
- 'reading in Chinese';
- 'caring for students';
- 'ability to build rapport with students';
- 'team work';
- 'sense of responsibility and commitment';
- 'ability to build rapport with colleagues'; and
- 'professional ethics'.

However, the ratings also show that the graduates did not perform well in the areas of

'classroom management', 'assessing students' learning', 'helping students with emotional and /or behavioural problems' and 'encouraging students' independent learning and helping them to develop problem-solving skills'. It is therefore suggested that areas concerning students' personal development, dealing with their emotional and behavioural problems, leadership, creativity, as well as coping with administrative work should be improved within the programme.

Educational Importance of the Study

This study is significant in four ways. Firstly, it yields an instrument with a high reliability coefficient that may well capture school principals' expectations and perceptions of beginning teachers themselves. The findings reinforce the knowledge base that teacher competence is a dynamic and sufficiency concept. Secondly, drawing on the findings, focus areas for improvement in initial teacher education programmes may be identified based on the relative importance of the competency items as rated by the novices and the school principals. Teacher educators and the beginning teachers need to be consistently aware of the expectations and demands from schools. As teacher competence is a dynamic notion, the demands are changing with the new roles of schools and education in the new century. New emphasis on Information Technology (IT) and the all-round development of children requires teachers to be competent in developing IT teaching and learning resources, and in organising extra-curricular activities. Teacher education programmes need to foster initiatives in the areas of work and continual development among the students. In line with the demands from the education reform, the programmes also need to raise students' English language level, IT competence level and ability to communicate in Putgonhua.

Thirdly, the differences or discrepancies in the perceptions of the novices and the school principals are important areas which need to be addressed by the provision of in-service teacher development opportunities. Areas such as professional and academic competency, problem solving, and more specific abilities including relating to parents, catering for the emotional needs of students, and competencies in school administration will benefit from continual professional development after graduation throughout the career of the teacher. Finally, the school principals need to communicate their expectations to the beginning teachers and should emphasize the areas of work requiring greater attention. It is hoped that through the joint effort of the beginning teachers and the principals, the quality of education offered to students may be improved.

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